

Elijah Was the First to Eat

by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

Elijah said... “Make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son” (I Kings 17:13).

This simple yet touching story tells us one of the things we must do in the famines of our lives. One day we will live in heaven, if we follow the Lord. We will have all the food and clothing we need, our homes will be lovely. Nor will there be a spiritual famine. We will have joy every day, the bread of heaven which is new every morning. We will drink of the water of life freely—that is, there will be no lack of truth, teaching us the things we must do.

On the road to heaven there is sometimes hunger and thirst, especially when the church is in the wilderness where little grows. In the New Church we know the wonderful ideals of the Heavenly Doctrine, but all too often we are far below them. We let earthly values become paramount. We think we have the church, and then, when troubles arise, we look for solutions in terms of this world and its necessities, not from eternal principles.

People who are trying to follow the Lord will sometimes bring famine on themselves. Like the king of Elijah’s time, they will toy with the worship of other gods, becoming too involved with wanting popularity, money, power, or pleasure. Then their morality becomes a thing of this world, and even their worship becomes more words than substance. It is pitfalls like these which bring about the famine of the spirit.

And what is that famine? Simply a lack of heavenly joy. When we find ourselves unmoved by good loves, when we seem to be without deep and worthwhile principles any longer, then we suffer spiritual hunger and thirst. Perhaps famine will strike when we are bothered by some earthly things—by financial troubles or ill-health or worry about a child or a friend. Then we give in to our tendency to seek our own answers in terms of this world, and we find ourselves sad and alone. Our spiritual loves seem to have deserted us. We are hungry.

The story of Elijah and his kindness to the widow of Zarephath helps us to know how to think and how to behave in times such as these. Its answer is so simple, yet inevitably it performs a miracle in our lives.

The terrible drought Elijah called on the land of Israel was because the Lord was not being fully acknowledged by the church—even as sometimes He is not fully our God today. The famine which followed represents the lack of true heavenly joy. “The heaven was shut up,” the Lord said, meaning that the true internal burden of the church was not yet sensed and appreciated (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9198; 4844:12).

In the midst of this drought, Elijah journeyed to a little town in a neighboring country, and there he found a widow and sustained her and her son. A widow represents a particular quality in all of us—the state of mind in which we are longing for understanding, for truth, but we don’t have it. This longing is a part of us. It is far removed from that other part of us—the pride that leads us to seek our own solutions to problems. Widowhood in the Word represents a longing for something

we don't have. We sense that we don't have the wisdom to seek the better life that the Lord has promised us, and we want to find it. This is spiritual widowhood—a state temporarily unfulfilled. It is a temporary state, since widowhood lasts only for the life of the body. The state of heaven is one of marriage.

While on earth the Lord said, “Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow” (Luke 4:25-26). Why was Elijah sent to that widow, and not to one of his own land? Because the widows of Israel represented those who didn't want insight and understanding. They had no truth, but neither did they care for it (*Arcana Coelestia* 4844). The widow of this foreign town represented an intense longing for guidance.

If we think that because we have the teaching of the New Church, we know the truth and don't need to learn more, that attitude isn't going to turn us to the Lord. We will be bereft, but we will not know it. It is that kind of thinking that produces a spiritual drought. But in us there is a widow of Zarephath—a sense that we *don't* really have the church. We feel we are outside of the church—we haven't yet appreciated its true power and beauty—and we long for its truth, so that we can be part of it.

The prophet is the Word itself, the Lord appearing to us. Note what the woman was doing when he came. She was gathering sticks. To gather sticks represents to do good for the sake of reward—which is the reason most of us do good at first (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2812; 8495; 9011). She was gathering sticks, and her work concealed her terrible sorrow. She was preparing one last meal before life would end for her and her son. Don't we sometimes feel that we are pushing on with the things we are doing because we must, but that the life is about to go out of our efforts? We have felt miserable for a time, and we feel we can't keep going. This is part of spiritual temptation.

Then a stranger appeared. He asked the widow for water, and, despite her terrible plight, she silently obeyed. It was the ancient custom of kindness to a stranger, and even in her despair she rose above herself to keep the law she knew. As she was going, Elijah called again, “Please bring me a morsel of bread” (I Kings 17:11). Then she told him her situation: she had a little meal, and a bit of oil, and she was gathering sticks to make a cake for herself and her son before they died.

What an incredible story! Think of her silent hopelessness—one last meal and then a slow death. Yet when a stranger asked a favor, she immediately responded. Even when he asked food, she did not refuse, merely told him how things stood with her.

Elijah knew her plight, but he spoke as he did so that the delivery of millions of spiritually destitute people might be explained. He said to her,

“Go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth’” (I Kings 17:13-14).

The widow did what Elijah said. She brought him both water and cake, and she lived.

Elijah asked for water, for the search for water represents looking for the truth. He asked for a cake, for this represents the conjunction of truth with good—a conjunction which seems absent in times of temptations. The widow's answer reflects how little of genuine good we have at first—it is about to run out. Yet there must be a conjunction of truth and good offered up to the Lord, represented by Elijah, first.

That was the secret of this strange request. It is also the secret of how we come out of misery and unhappiness—even if the path seems very, very long. The widow had to agree to give drink and food to the prophet first, because it represents our willingness to give the Lord His due first. In explaining this action the Heavenly Doctrine says, “Good and its longing for truth is described by the charity toward the prophet, which was greater than toward herself and her son” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9198). And again, “The cake which she was to make for him first represented the good of love to the Lord, whom, out of the little she had, she was to love above herself and her son” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4844:12).

Now we can look at this action of the woman in two ways. We can marvel at the quiet kindness which moved her to bring water at such a time, to make food for the prophet out of her meager store, and to risk having less for herself and her son. Or we can say that the actual things she did were small and commonplace. She fetched some water, she gave away a little bit of cake. Both ways are right. There is an earth-shaking kindness in her simple acts, and yet they were not hard for her to do. If she had been a selfish, complaining woman they would have been hard, but for her they were part of her way of life.

Can we see what the Lord is telling us about our own life when there is spiritual famine? When we are deeply unhappy, there seems to be no way out. But really, there is one simple yet earth-shaking way. There is one way that seems so simple we tend to ignore it: serve the Lord first.

In times of sadness we become wrapped up in ourselves, and we tend to look for solutions within ourselves. If we are to come out of the sadness, we are going to have to go right back to the fundamental, simple question, “What does the Lord want me to do?” We're going to have to ask this question consciously, although in secret. This is a very private story about a prophet and a woman in need, and it tells about private decisions. Decisions on questions like these: Is there a first thing in our thoughts as we awaken each day? Does the Lord and His law figure in it? Is there a first in our thoughts about serving the church? Do we ask, not what others expect of us, but what our Lord expects of us? Is there a first when good things happen to us? Do we remember to thank Him, or take good fortune as our right? Is there a first when a new job comes our way? Do we ask ourselves humbly what the Lord would want of us in this work?

In these, and in so many other things, we may give water and a small cake to the Lord first—by seeking both His way of doing things (His truth) and His wish for us (His good). And in every one of these things, the decision is both dramatic and everyday. It is dramatic because of the incredible impact or result of asking ourselves in each part of life what the Lord wants. It will change, completely change, the direction of our lives. It will make the church start to leave the

wilderness in us. But it is everyday, because it doesn't take much effort! What does the Lord want me to do today? Five minutes of prayer in the early morning will make the day far easier. What does the Lord want me to do for His church? A little reflection will make our work for the church more joyful. What does the Lord want out of me in this job I'm starting? What did He give me this particular happiness for? How can I thank Him? Think of Him first.

Perhaps it isn't strange that in grief or unhappiness we feel at times unwilling to ask questions like these. The hells want us not to put the Lord first in our thinking, not to bring Him into the forefront of each decision by asking such questions. They try to make it seem as if He is the cause of our unhappiness, or that He is displeased with us or is punishing us—anything to stop us from turning to Him in simple obedience and saying, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

What the woman did was not that big a thing. She put down her sticks and went to get water. She made a cake from her meager supplies. But it could have been such a hard thing! Had she allowed herself to be completely wrapped up in her grief she might have turned her back on the prophet, or rebuked him for trespassing on her misery. Perhaps when he approached her there was a moment's unwillingness, but if so we are not told. For the sake of the internal sense, her obedience was immediate.

And we must remember that her delivery from the famine didn't come in a moment. She lived on a small bit of meal and a tiny bit of oil, day by day, until the Lord sent rain on Israel. Then and only then, did she have plenty.

Sometimes it is hard for us, too, to break out of a sorrow and turn once again to the Lord. Sometimes it takes a long time for the hard time to pass. But the solution this story gives is the only possible one which guarantees happiness in the end—resolving to consciously put the Lord's wishes into the forefront of our minds, and pick ourselves up and go on.

The result will be simple. Somewhere, miraculously, we will find our way through the drought and the hunger, until true joy heaven is opened for us too. We will find we have just enough joy, day by day, to keep going at first. But enough is all we really need.

A woman was about to die—worse still, she was about to watch her son die with her. We will likely never face anything quite like that. Yet she could take time out of her own misery to show simple kindness, and because of that she lived.

Life is not nearly that hard for us on a natural level, but we too have struggles to face sometimes. Can we give love to the Lord and thought to the Lord first, even if it's just a little love and a little thought? If we can, we too will survive the droughts which will come into our lives. Through simple actions, our world can turn around, and the church in us will not die, but live forever.

Amen.

Lessons: I Kings 17:8-16; Luke 4:16-30; *Arcana Coelestia* 9198:6-7